

# Unseen Allies and Adversaries: Native American Experiences During the American Revolution

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## Abstract

This paper explores the varied and frequently overlooked lives of Native Americans during the American Revolution. The American Revolution was pivotal for the United States and Native American tribes, impacting both significantly. Native Americans had to grapple with choosing sides and navigating the challenges of living in a battlefield environment, risking disease and famine. They formed alliances with different groups, engaging in crucial battles and facing internal tensions within tribes. Leaders made strategic decisions to align with the British or American colonists based on their best interests. Despite diplomatic efforts, Native Americans lost land and experienced cultural disruption during and after the war, leading to a diminished political role in the new states. However, they adapted by redefining their cultures with the influence of Blacks and Europeans to preserve their identities over time. This study highlights the critical and often overlooked contributions of Native Americans during the American Revolution. It sheds light on their crucial role in key events of the revolution and its aftermath, despite their usual exclusion from historical narratives.

**Keywords:** Native Americans, American Revolution, Colonial Alliances, Indigenous Strategies, Cultural Impact, Historical Narratives, Autonomy, Tribal Experiences.

## Introduction

The American Revolution, which lasted from 1775 to 1783, was a monumental moment in U.S. history—when the Thirteen Colonies declared independence from Great Britain and became an independent nation. This monumental shift brought about profound political, social, and economic changes that affected many individuals and groups—rebels, loyalists, European powers, and Native American tribes. Despite its immense influence on the lives of these various factions, this period is often narrated as if only the colonial experience mattered. But what about the Native Americans who lived on these lands? Their presence and role in this historical moment are often overlooked or underserved in textbooks and popular histories.

Understanding the involvement of Native Americans in the American Revolution is crucial for various reasons. To begin with, it enriches the historical narrative by recognizing the diverse perspectives and active roles of all participants rather than portraying Native American tribes as passive observers. Their choices and engagements significantly shaped the direction and results of the conflict. Exploring these interactions illuminates the intricate dynamics between Native American tribes and European powers, uncovering the alliances, tensions, and diplomatic processes that unfolded. Lastly, delving into these experiences emphasizes the enduring consequences of the Revolution on Native American societies, such as land dispossession, forced relocations, and cultural transformations that endure to this day.

This study investigates the varied experiences of Native Americans during the American Revolution. It documents their alliances and military involvement and uncovers the socio-political consequences of the war on them. This study aims to understand their perspective and role in the revolution. Specifically, it investigates the factors that led Native American tribes to ally with either the British or the colonists; it analyses the military strategies and engagements in which Native American warriors participated; and it assesses the short- and long-term effects of the revolution on Native American lands, governance, and cultural practices.

### Historical Context

Before the American Revolution, Native American societies were diverse and complex, with distinct cultures, languages, and social structures:

Indian country was decentralized and diverse, but not disconnected. Routes of trade and communication, most of them millennia old and following the great river systems, crisscrossed the continent. The goods that moved along them were, for the most part, few and rare—rarer and perhaps more valuable than the gold and spices that western Europeans of the same era traveled the world to acquire. Some closely neighboring peoples might exchange crucial resources—corn, for instance, for meat or fish—and some at slightly greater distance may have controlled access to particularly valuable quarries that provided the raw material for stone tools or weapons (Richter 6).

These societies ranged from the large, politically sophisticated Iroquois Confederacy in the Northeast to the agriculturally rich Cherokee Nation in the Southeast and the nomadic Plains tribes like the Sioux. Each tribe had its own governance systems, often involving councils of elders or chiefs, and maintained intricate trade networks and alliances. Socially, these tribes were deeply rooted in their cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and a solid connection to their ancestral lands, providing sustenance and a sense of identity and continuity. The arrival of European settlers in the 16th and 17th centuries marked the beginning of significant changes for Native American societies. Initial interactions varied widely; some were characterized by cooperation and mutual benefit, while others involved conflict and exploitation. The French, for example, engaged in the fur trade with tribes such as the Huron and Algonquin, fostering relatively peaceful and cooperative relationships. In contrast, English settlers often sought to expand their territories, leading to frequent clashes with tribes like the Powhatan Confederacy in Virginia and the Wampanoag in New England. David .K. Richter mentions:

Exact statistics will never be known, but in 1492, the diverse but inter-connected area east of the Mississippi may have been home to more than 2 million Native people.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent decades those numbers shrank rapidly as European colonists unwittingly brought with them epidemic diseases to which Indians had no immunity. Still, as late as 1700, the Euro-American population barely exceeded 250,000, and the colonists were confined almost exclusively to coastal and riverine enclaves, most very near the Atlantic seaboard. By 1750 the population balance had shifted decisively, with Europeans and their enslaved African workforce exploding to nearly 1.25 million, and the Native population probably shrinking to less than 250,000 (7).

These early interactions had profound effects on Native American societies. European goods, such as metal tools and firearms, were integrated into Native cultures, altering traditional ways of life. European settlers introduced diseases like smallpox and influenza, to which indigenous peoples had no immunity. Diseases carried by European explorers devastated tribal populations, causing their numbers to plummet. As a result, the social strata of these tribes were severely disrupted. These diseases decimated populations,

causing social and cultural upheaval. Additionally, European colonization led to competition over resources and territory, often resulting in violent conflicts and the displacement of Native communities. As European colonies expanded, colonial governments implemented policies that further disrupted Native American societies. The British, for instance, employed a strategy of divide and conquer, exploiting existing rivalries between tribes to secure alliances and weaken opposition. Treaties were often used as tools of manipulation, with colonial authorities making and breaking agreements to serve their interests. These treaties frequently resulted in the cession of vast tracts of Native land to the colonies.

One notable policy was the Proclamation of 1763, issued by the British Crown, which aimed to stabilize relations with Native Americans by restricting colonial expansion westward beyond the Appalachian Mountains. While the Proclamation intended to prevent further conflicts, it was largely ignored by settlers and colonial governments eager for land, leading to continued encroachment on Native territories. Colonial policies also sought to assimilate Native Americans into European ways of life, often through missionary efforts and education programs. These efforts aimed to convert Native populations to Christianity and replace traditional cultural practices with European customs. Such policies eroded Native American cultural identities and autonomy, fostering resentment and resistance among the tribes.

### **Native American Alliances and Strategies**

A variety of complex factors, including historical relationships, geographical considerations, and strategic interests, influenced the alliances formed by Native American tribes during the American Revolution. Many tribes had long-standing relationships with the British or French before the conflict, affecting their decisions. Tribes with established trade partnerships or treaties with the British were more inclined to support them against the Colonists, who were seen as a more significant threat to their lands. Those colonists believed that “Indians must either surrender gracefully to a superior Christian civilization or die in a futile attempt to resist”(Richter 108). Geographical location played a crucial role in determining alliances. Tribes located near colonial settlements frequently faced direct threats from encroaching settlers and thus were more likely to ally with the British, who promised to restrain colonial expansion. Conversely, tribes further inland or those less impacted by immediate colonial pressures sometimes viewed the Revolution as an opportunity to renegotiate their own power dynamics. According to Gregory Dowd:

Only one group of Upper Ohio country Indians would hold out For friendship with the emerging republic for most of the Revolutionary War: the inhabitants of the polyglot cluster of villages surrounding Coshocton. All others had taken arms against the United States by the fall of 1777(65).

Ultimately, each tribe evaluated how best to preserve their autonomy and protect their lands. Some tribes believed that supporting the British would ensure their territorial integrity, as the British had previously issued the Proclamation of 1763, which limited colonial expansion. Others saw an alliance with the Colonists as a way to resist traditional rivals or believed that a new American government might be more amenable to their concerns. The alliances were diverse and complex. The Iroquois Confederacy was divided, with the Mohawk siding with the British due to long-standing trade relations, while the Oneida and Tuscarora supported the Colonists. The Cherokee predominantly sided with the British, viewing the Colonists as a direct threat to their lands and way of life. The Shawnee, located in the Ohio Valley, also aligned with the British, seeing the Revolution as an opportunity to regain control over their lands.

Native American tribes played crucial roles in the military strategies of both the British and the Colonists. Their knowledge of the terrain, guerrilla warfare tactics, and ability to mobilize quickly made them

valuable allies. They employed guerrilla tactics, including hit-and-run attacks and ambushes, to harass and demoralize enemy forces. Many tribes focused on defending their homelands from direct threats, while others used their alliances to leverage support for their own goals and conduct strategic raids. Diplomacy played a significant role, with tribal leaders engaging in complex negotiations and shifting allegiances to maximize their advantages and protect their interests.

### **Conflicts and Consequences**

The involvement of Native American tribes in the American Revolution extended beyond their alliances and had significant impacts on their communities through major battles, conflicts, and the war's aftermath: Most of North America was still Indian country in 1775. Indian people still dominated most of the continent and walked the streets of colonial towns. Much of colonial life involved Indians; much of colonial war, diplomacy, and commerce revolved around them. Writing to fellow revolutionary John Adams in 1812, Thomas Jefferson recalled that in Williamsburg before the Revolution, Indians "were in the habit of coming often, and in great numbers to the seat of our government, where I was much with them."<sup>104</sup> The Revolution that erupted in 1775 was bound to affect and involve Indians; but it also ushered in a new era and a new society from which they were to be increasingly excluded. The interethnic societies and cultural mixings that characterized much of Indian America, by 1775, had been a long time in the making. The Revolution did not terminate them overnight but did produce a new government and society increasingly committed to the notion that the Indian country east of the Mississippi should cease to exist (Calloway 24).

Several key battles saw Native American participation, including the Battle of Oriskany, where the Iroquois Confederacy fought alongside the British, and the Chickamauga Wars, where the Cherokee engaged in prolonged conflicts against American settlers. The Gnadenhütten Massacre, a tragic event, saw the killing of neutral Lenape (Delaware) Indians by American militia, highlighting the mistrust and violence that characterized many encounters. Native American forces also played strategic roles in sieges like those at Fort Henry, showcasing their importance in British military campaigns.

The American Revolution had devastating consequences for Native American tribal lands and resources. Many tribes lost substantial portions of their ancestral lands due to military defeats, forced treaties, and subsequent American expansion. The Iroquois Confederacy, for instance, saw their homeland in New York severely diminished following the Sullivan Expedition of 1779. The war also disrupted traditional hunting, fishing, and agricultural practices, leading to resource depletion, food shortages, and famine. Military campaigns often destroyed villages, crops, and the natural environment, exacerbating the hardships faced by Native populations.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, Native American tribes navigated a new wave of challenges. Numerous treaties were signed, often involving significant land cessions, as the new American government sought to expand its territory. The Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1784) forced the Iroquois Confederacy to cede vast tracts of land. The loss of land and resources led to the displacement of many Native American communities, pushing tribes like the Cherokee further west, away from their traditional homelands. This displacement fragmented tribal societies and eroded cultural cohesion.

Despite the end of the Revolution, conflicts between Native American tribes and American settlers continued. The Northwest Indian War saw a coalition of tribes resisting American expansion into the Ohio Valley, including the Shawnee, Miami, and Delaware. This highlighted the persistent resistance to encroachments on their territories. The Revolution and its aftermath profoundly affected Native American

cultures, with forced migrations, loss of traditional lands, and interactions with American settlers leading to significant changes in social structures, governance, and cultural practices. Efforts to assimilate Native Americans into American society intensified, further eroding traditional ways of life.

## **Cultural and Social Impacts**

The American Revolution and its aftermath brought significant changes to the governance and societal structures of Native American tribes. In response to external threats, some tribes centralized their leadership, with the rise of prominent figures like chiefs or war leaders, to better coordinate defense and negotiate treaties. The Cherokee, for example, saw the emergence of leaders like Dragging Canoe, who advocated for a unified and militant response to American encroachments. However, the pressures of war and subsequent displacement also led to the fragmentation of some tribal communities, as groups splintered and sought new alliances to bolster their position against American expansion, as seen with the divisions within the Iroquois Confederacy. Tribes also had to adapt to new political realities, engaging with American governments and adopting new political strategies incorporating elements of traditional practices and European systems.

The cultural practices and identities of Native American tribes were deeply affected by the events of the American Revolution. Despite the upheaval, many communities made concerted efforts to preserve their traditions, including language, ceremonies, and spiritual beliefs through rituals, storytelling, and oral histories. Cultural exchange and adaptation led to syncretism, where Native American practices incorporated European elements, evident in areas such as dress and agricultural techniques. The introduction of new religious ideas and educational practices by missionary efforts presented both opportunities for cultural blending and resistance, as some tribes adopted Christianity. In contrast, others strived to retain their spiritual beliefs.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, Native American tribes employed various strategies to adapt to changing circumstances while resisting cultural assimilation and loss of autonomy. They engaged in diplomatic efforts, utilized legal mechanisms to protect their rights and lands, and, in some cases, took legal action to assert their sovereignty, as exemplified by the Cherokee's adoption of a written constitution and the *Worcester v. Georgia* case. Economic adaptation involved engaging in trade, adopting new agricultural techniques, and participating in emerging markets. Armed resistance remained a critical strategy, with conflicts like the Northwest Indian War and the Seminole Wars demonstrating the lengths tribes would go to defend their lands and way of life. Additionally, cultural revival movements and the establishment of institutions like the Cherokee Nation's printing press aimed to strengthen community cohesion and identity by emphasizing the importance of traditional practices and education.

Primary sources like treaties, letters, and contemporaneous accounts offer invaluable perspectives into the lived experiences and viewpoints of Native Americans during the American Revolutionary period. Oral histories and traditional narratives are crucial for understanding the cultural and social dimensions of Native American experiences during the Revolution. A comparative analysis of various primary sources allows for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding. Contrasting colonial and Native perspectives highlights differing motivations, objectives, and experiences, with colonial accounts often emphasizing military strategies and political goals. In contrast, Native sources focus on land, cultural survival, and community well-being. Within Native communities, there were often differing views and strategies, as seen in the divisions within the Iroquois Confederacy. Comparing British and American sources in relation to Native involvement reveals how each side viewed their Indigenous allies and



adversaries, with British accounts highlighting strategic importance and American sources often depicting Native tribes as obstacles to expansion. This comparative approach underscores the multifaceted nature of Native participation in the war.

### **Long-term Implications**

The American Revolutionary conflict left indelible and far-reaching marks on Native American societies, substantially influencing and reshaping the trajectory of their futures in myriad ways. The aftermath saw significant land loss as the new United States government pursued aggressive westward expansion, often through unfair or coercive treaties, resulting in widespread displacement and the erosion of traditional territories that fundamentally altered Native ways of life. The cultural impact extended beyond immediate land loss, with forced relocations and assimilation policies disrupting traditional practices, languages, and social structures. American education and religious systems aimed to assimilate Natives into European-American culture, further threatening their heritage. Native tribes also found themselves increasingly marginalized politically, as the U.S. government viewed them as inferior obstacles to progress, leading to policies that undermined sovereignty and self-governance.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, there was a transition in policies impacting Native communities, with several agreements in the early 1800s, such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which led to the Trail of Tears, causing additional loss of Native lands. Assimilation policies throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as boarding schools like Carlisle, sought to eradicate Native cultures by removing children and imposing European-American customs. A shift occurred in the mid-20th century towards recognizing rights and self-determination, with the Indian Reorganization Act aiming to restore self-governance. The latter 20th century saw movements for civil rights and sovereignty gain momentum through legislation recognizing tribal sovereignty and cultural revitalization.

Contemporary Native communities reflect on their complex heritage from the Revolution and aftermath as they navigate cultural revitalization efforts to sustain practices, languages, and traditions through cultural centers, language programs, and ceremonies. Legal and political advocacy remains crucial to protect rights and interests like land, environmental protection, and tribal sovereignty, with victories and gains helping secure greater recognition and autonomy. Educational initiatives focus on teaching accurate Native history and contributions to both Native and non-Native populations through school curricula, public awareness, and research highlighting Indigenous perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

This study has delved into the varied and intricate experiences of Native Americans throughout the American Revolution and the lasting consequences it has had. Key findings reveal that Native American tribes played crucial roles in the Revolution, forming strategic alliances based on historical relationships, geographical considerations, and survival interests. However, the Revolution had devastating impacts on Native American lands, resources, and autonomy, leading to significant displacement and cultural disruption. In the post-Revolutionary era, policies often further marginalized Native American communities, but they also laid the groundwork for future advocacy and self-determination efforts. Contemporary Native American communities are actively engaged in cultural revitalization, legal advocacy, and educational initiatives to address and overcome historical injustices.

Understanding the experiences and impacts of the American Revolution on Native American communities provides a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective on American history. It highlights the

interconnectedness of different groups and the importance of acknowledging diverse narratives. This study underscores the resilience and agency of Native American communities in the face of significant challenges and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the nation's past. Further research could focus on detailed case studies of specific tribes, comparative analysis between different regions and tribes, and longitudinal studies tracing the long-term, multi-generational impacts to offer valuable insights into the enduring legacy of this period on Native American communities.

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